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SUBJECT: AS LANG MAI FOLLOWERS HUNKER DOWN IN LAM DONG, ANOTHER GROUP IS EVICTED IN KHANH HOA

REF: HANOI 873 AND PREVIOUS

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Subject: As Lang Mai Followers Hunker Down in Lam Dong, Another Group Is Evicted in Khanh Hoa

¶11. (SBU) Summary: More than 200 Lang Mai monks and nuns remain at the Phuoc Hue pagoda in Lam Dong province. Reliable contacts report that police continue to monitor their activities and attempt to mobilize members of the community to sign a petition to evict them. Twenty-one Lang Mai monks and nuns were forcibly evicted from a pagoda in Khanh Hoa province on November 29; an additional eleven nuns have taken sanctuary in Hue. There have been no reports of violence since the earlier violence and forced evictions in June and September (Ref A). Sympathetic provincial Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha leaders continue to press the Central VBS and Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) to allow Lang Mai followers to practice their faith freely, and there are signs the Central VBS has approved sponsorship requests from pagodas in Dong Nai and Dalat. Our Lang Mai contacts are pessimistic the CRA will approve the sponsorships, however, because they do not believe the GVN wants large groups of non-VBS monks congregating and promoting alternative Buddhist teachings outside of the legal framework on religion. ConGenOff has requested permission to visit Lam Dong from December 15 - 17 to meet with all parties involved. Three resident EU diplomats will visit the Phuoc Hue pagoda during the week of December 7. Post has reiterated our calls that the situation be resolved peacefully and in accordance with the law during November meetings with MFA, MPS and CRA officials. End summary.

Campaign Against Lang Mai Continues

¶12. (SBU) 212 of the 291 Lang Mai monks and nuns forcefully evicted from Bat Nha pagoda on September 27 continue to reside at Phuoc Hue pagoda in Bao Loc, Lam Dong. However, HCMC contacts report their situation remains tenuous and that some local authorities continue to pressure pagoda leaders to evict the followers. One reliable contact who recently visited her sister, a Lang Mai nun currently residing at Phuoc Hue pagoda, said that police maintain a constant watch on the pagoda from a hotel across the street. They frequently visit Phuoc Hue to check the residency permits of pagoda residents to determine if they have permission from the local government to reside there. This contact said police are also lobbying townspeople in Bao Loc to sign a petition asking Phuoc Hue's head monk, Thich Thai Thuan, to evict the Lang Mai group.

¶13. (SBU) VBS leaders in Lam Dong confirmed Internet reports that provincial leaders asked Thich Thai Thuan to evict the Lang Mai group on November 2. Thich Thai Thuan told ConGenOff the lunch meeting was "friendly," as officials tried to use persuasion rather than threats to convince him that harboring Lang Mai followers was not in his best interests. Thuan confirmed reports of frequent police checks, as well as attempts by visiting delegations from the monks' and nuns' home provinces to persuade them to leave and return to their place of residence. Several Lang Mai monks and nuns told ConGenOff that local authorities have also tried to pressure their relatives to persuade them to return home by making life difficult for family members, including discouraging employers from hiring them or threatening to withhold promotions for those in government positions. One Lang Mai leader said his brother, who is a schoolteacher, was forced to attend a meeting where school officials denounced the Lang Mai community and the VBS leaders who offered them refuge as "instigators of unrest engaged in anti-government activities."

Lang Mai Followers in Khanh Hoa Evicted

¶14. (SBU) Followers also reported to us that local police forcibly evicted 21 Lang Mai monks and nuns seeking refuge at Tu Duc pagoda in Khanh Hoa province on November 29. The eviction occurred even though Tu Duc's leader, the Venerable Thich Giac Vien, agreed to sponsor and register temporary residence permits for two monks and 19 nuns. Eleven other Lang Mai followers from the province were allowed to remain at the pagoda. Senior Lang Mai monk Phap Sy, who was escorted by police to Khanh Hoa

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province after being evicted from Bat Nha, said he is living at home and routinely asked by local police to report his movements. Another leader, Phap Tu, remains in contact with ConGen but declined to reveal his current location. In addition to the groups in Lam Dong and Khanh Hoa, eleven Lang Mai nuns are currently residing at Tu Hieu pagoda in Hue province. The Lang Mai contingent in Lam Dong participated in disaster relief efforts in Hue led by Phuoc Hue leader Thich Thai Thuan, but were reportedly escorted by Lam Dong authorities throughout their visit.

Provincial VBS Leaders Offer Support

¶15. (SBU) The Executive Committee of the VBS initially issued an ultimatum that gave Lang Mai followers until November 30 to end their "illegal gathering" at Phuoc Hue pagoda in Lam Dong. However, the date has come and gone without official action. Our contacts report that the Central VBS has approved sponsorship offers by the Venerable Thich Minh Nghia of Toan Giac pagoda in Dong Nai and the Venerable Thich Vien Thanh of Van Hanh pagoda in Dalat. The sponsorships have been forwarded to the National CRA for review. Lang Mai contacts doubt the CRA will approve the sponsorship requests, however, because they believe authorities are not comfortable with the idea of having large groups of non-resident and non-VBS Buddhists promulgating alternative teachings outside of the legal framework on religion. Another monk also pointed out that Thich Minh Nghia does not have permanent residency in Dong Nai and Toan Giac pagoda is not recognized as an official VBS property.

¶16. (SBU) Comment: The situation in Lam Dong province has been

violence-free since September 28, but some of the remaining Lang Mai followers continue to be subjected to less overt forms of harassment. The legal situation of the remaining followers, and the local government's plans for them, remain unclear. In November, Embassy officers met with MFA, MPS and CRA officials to reiterate the concerns expressed in September and during the Human Rights Dialogue that the situation be resolved peacefully and in accordance with the law. Post has requested a meeting with CRA Vice Chairman Xuan during the week of December 7, and ConGenOff has requested permission (since Lam Dong is not part of the GVN-recognized consular district) to visit Lam Dong to meet with provincial officials, VBS leaders, and the Lang Mai practitioners themselves on December 15. Three resident EU diplomats will travel to the province next week and will brief us upon their return to Hanoi.

¶7. (SBU) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
FAIRFAX